

Religious Narratives, Scientific Narrative, and Environmental Awareness

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Narrative lies at the heart of the humanistic endeavor. In order for humans to find emplacement and a sense of belonging, a story must be told.

Religions traditionally have told that story. Various answers may be found in this story. The story might also pose more questions. Regardless, the human can find touchstones in story, connection points that provide meaning and a sense of connectivity and purpose.

Our first story revolves around family. Where do I come from? Who are my parents? Where is the father? Where is the mother?

Our next story engages kith and kin. Who are my friends? Who are my siblings? With which group do I find comfort?

The third story leads to the intimacy of mating and reproduction. Whom shall I marry? How many children will we support?

The fourth story brings us into the broader social network of society, requiring means of livelihood and an ethical system that values not only immediate family but also neighbors and neighborhoods, cities, states, nations, and international alliances.

Religions generate many stories that provide archetypes for each of these phases of the human story. The story of Gilgamesh, of Adam and Eve, of Cain and Abel, of Arjuna and his four brothers in India, of Buddha's quest for freedom, of Izanagi and Izanami creating Japan, the Anansi spider tales from Africa, even Hamlet's soliloquies all carry lessons and insight into the often difficult nature of the human project. Each takes up the age-old questions of who begot whom? Who married whom? Who befriended whom? What alliances were formed?

Underlying these archetypal relationships a large question looms: when did it all begin? From whence did all this arise? And on the other end, one asks the question, what does this all mean? What is the goal, the purpose, the outcome? What is inevitable?

The Vedas state that all things arise from desire, that the universe comes into being when heat and breath, found in the human person, separate and delineate heaven and earth. The *I Ching* states that Yin, the feminine principle, interacts with Yang, the masculine principle in a myriad of modalities, forming the human as the balance point between heaven and earth. The texts of Jainism proclaim that life and soul and consciousness have always been present and that each individual being treads a solitary path to freedom. The Hebrew Bible states that a presiding deity separated light from darkness, day from night, earth from water. Upon the earth this deity placed plants, animals, and humans, and told the humans to prosper and obey his command, returning periodically to urge his prophets to warn people of dire consequences if they strayed from his commandments.

Once people prosper and fulfill their desires, they seek guidance for their behaviors. Literature, from Biblical examples to fables to theatre, demonstrates the need to abide by a code of ethics to ensure maximum happiness. Without a sense of propriety, the people become lost; civilizations perish.

The story of science responds to the same questions posed by traditional religions. From where do we come? A flaring forth of matter more than 13 billion years ago set all things in motion. Where are we now? According to contemporary cosmology, we are at the center of an expanding universe; in fact, every point is at the center of an expanding universe. How did we come to be? According to the best biological research, we slowly, over a period of billions of God-sized years, we advanced from bacteria to cellular life forms, to organisms, first taking shape in the ocean and eventually crawling upon and flying above the land.

Our particular expression of life, the human being, craves the company of others and a sense of purpose supported by a story. From the beginnings of recorded time, we have reflected back to ourselves a sense of self and a sense of community, from the rock paintings at Lascaux to the dramas and comedies now circulated widely on television, the internet, and other media. The articulation and expression of self in relationship to others results in norms and codes of behavior. Societal structures require ethical codes. By announcing the Ten Commandments, Moses established the foundation for the Jewish, Christian, Islamic traditions, as well as the secular legal tradition. By promulgating the core ethics of non-violence, truthfulness, not stealing, sexual propriety, and non-hording, the early sages of India helped shape the Hindu, Jaina, and Buddhist traditions, the latter of which spread throughout Asia. Confucius, in his advocacy of the five great virtues of propriety (*li*), human heartedness (*ren*), loyalty (*xin*), righteousness (*yi*), and knowledge (*zhi*), shaped the ethics that governs the East Asian world. Each of these systems has spoken with a voice that proclaims: we must learn to live with one another for the sake of the common good.

Journey of the Universe invites us to reconsider and reconceptualize our place in the world. Tribal traditions root themselves in a sense of place and, worldwide, have developed local systems for ensuring human survival. The prophetic monotheisms developed a worldview based on the premises of the Genesis story of the creation, Moses's bestowal of an ethical code, and the demands of prophets such as Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos, Jesus, and Muhammed. India and China, while often agnostic on the existence of divinity, nonetheless sets forth compelling ideas for improving human behavior, moving toward a place of flow (Sanskrit: *rta*) and harmony (Chinese: *he*).

The scientific story of the evolution of the universe does not diminish the perduring relevance of these older narratives. In fact, the realities of industrial pollution call for a return in many ways to these tested modalities for regulating human behavior. Biologist Lynn Margulies once lamented that it would be shame if human interference rendered the planet inhabitable only by cockroaches.¹ This sensibility arises from one of the core human needs: survival. As native peoples worldwide grapple with climate change and culture loss, this refrain will be echoed increasingly: we must change our behaviors in order to ensure the existence of a living planet for our grandchildren and succeeding generations.

The story of science also finds accord with other narratives from religious traditions. Time honored wisdom has shown that violence and murder are not sustainable. This value can and must be extended beyond the narrow domain of human

¹ Lecture, "Gaian Views," Ecological Prospects: Scientific, Religious, and Aesthetic Perspectives, Casassa Conferenc, Loyola Marymount University, March 10, 1991.

concern to the broader web of life that not only supports the human but has its own beauty and integrity that merits protection. In many ways, the Endangered Species Act extends the sixth of the Ten Commandments, Thou Shalt Not Kill, to the biosphere. Similarly, the current call for simple living echoes the tenth command to “not covet thy neighbor’s house,” which, when combined with Indian precept of not hoarding, can serve as a ready antidote against the rampant consumer that is currently choking the planet.

Journey of the Universe seeks to rekindle a sense of awe of and love for the natural world. So much intricacy, so much beauty has been made possible through human awareness. Through human ingenuity, we have explored the broad expanse of the continents, the depths of the sea, and the near reaches of space. However, due to ignorance and greed, the very stuff of beauty has become imperiled. Children can be raised in a purely virtual world, with unreal images, friends who are not present, surrounded with gadgetry, with little contact to the elements. Adults can be swept up in an unknowing haze of consumption, living a surface life measured by accumulations, not by depth of connection with others or a sense of higher purpose.

Religions have, by some, been deemed irrelevant by the advances in knowledge made possible by science. However, as suggested in the current project, science can provide a gateway to a new journey of exploration and discovery of self and nature. By understanding and embracing a journey that sees continuity within the emergence of the stars, the emergence of cells, the emergence of sexual bimorphism, and our own individual lives, a profound sense of connection may arise. With greater knowledge of the complexities of chemistry, with wider awareness of the causes of pollution, species loss, and climate change, a new ethic may take root, drawing from the vast legacy of human wisdom, applied to new challenges.

Religions, through their rituals and practices and teachings, can help remind individuals of the beauty of the universe, rekindling a sense of awe. Religions, through their ethical systems, can remind people to recognize their privileged place in the universe. Simply being present to oneself, to others, and to nature comprises in an act of profound religiosity. Feeling a sense of connection with the world can lead to a cultivation of care, an important step toward corrective, healing action.

Does science conflict with religion or religion with science? The two are not mutually exclusive. Their stories can help inspire and redirect human attention and intention away from exploitation and violence against the earth toward appreciation and acts of restorative harmony.